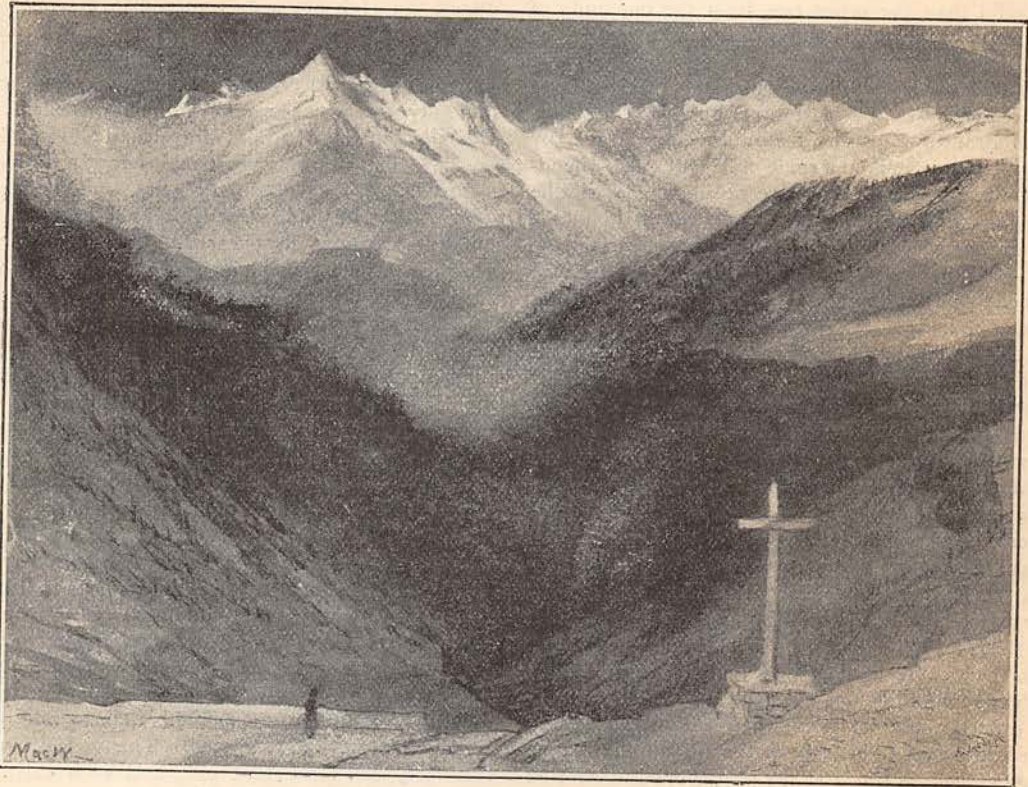


## THE SIMPLON PASS.

ILLUSTRATED BY J. MACWHIRTER, R.A.



LOOKING BACK OVER THE PASS.

**T**HE water which flows down from the snowy crests of the Alps, or bubbles forth in a myriad springs from their rocky flanks, makes its way to the sea through five great rivers, the Rhine, the Rhone, the Po, the Adige, and the Danube. A few streams, indeed, at the extreme east of the chain reach the Adriatic without passing into any of these rivers; but these, and indeed the Adige itself, may be reckoned as only satellites to the mighty Po, to which all of them will one day have to pay their tribute, when they have among them carried down enough *débris* from the mountains to fill up the head of the sea into which they all flow. For all practical purposes, then, we may speak of four main river-basins, separated from each other by the great mountain barrier, but connected by the paths which man has found means to make across the depressions in it. Many of these have existed from the remotest antiquity; for man in pursuit of gain, whether by war or in the more peaceful line of commerce, is not easily to be restrained by any obstacles which Nature can put in his way. Whether Gauls or Carthaginians were on their road to measure their

strength against the young state whose name was beginning to be a terror to the nations; or Rome herself, in the fulness of her maturity, was seeking for new conquests; or the Germanic tribes in later days were carrying the tide of conquest back again over the sunny lands to the south; each had, in turn, to cross the mighty chain, and each found existing roads by which horse and foot could pass it. In many cases these roads seem to have satisfied all the requirements of traffic until recent times.

Far to the east, indeed, Roman organisation did here and there, as half-effaced inscriptions and ruts deep-grooved in the rock testify to this day, make them passable for wheeled vehicles; but in the more central portions of the chain, where the peaks rise above the line of perpetual snows, mule-tracks seem to have served all needs. When Charlemagne was on his way to be crowned at Rome, at the end of the eighth century, he had to pass from Germany into Italy by the Wormser Joch, a steep and rough path, lying close to what is now the magnificent Stelvio road. The last two centuries have, however, altered all that. Not merely on wheels, but on rails, is it now possible to pass between nearly any two of the greater

river-basins already indicated. From the Rhine to the Po we go by the St. Gothard, with its wonderful corkscrew tunnels; from the Rhine to the Danube, by the Arlberg; from the Danube to the Po (or the Adige), by the Brenner—a line in some ways even more wonderful than the other two, from the ingenuity of the way in which the engineer has circumvented, instead of overcoming, the difficulties of a mountain pass.

But when we wish to leave the waters of the Rhone for those of the Po, we must either go far to the south-east of France in search of a railway, and travel by the somewhat roundabout route of Mont Cenis—roundabout, that is, for people whose business does not lie in the extreme west of Italy; or if we would take a directer course, must be content with crossing the Alps—as the old schoolboy joke has it, *summā diligentia*—on the top of a diligence (private carriages can also be had).

The most obvious carriage road between the streams that flow into the Gulf of Lyons and into the Adriatic respectively, is at the same time one of the most famous—perhaps, until the railway era brought other roads more into notice, quite the most famous—of all the Alpine highways. Everyone has heard of Napoleon's impatient inquiry: "When will the guns be able to cross the Simplon?" This was in the very earliest years of the century, soon after his narrow escape from defeat at Marengo had shown the necessity for some more practicable road from France into North Italy than that of the St. Bernard. The Simplon was ready to his hand. A carriageable road of some kind—rough enough, no doubt, according to modern ideas—had existed there for more than a hundred years; indeed, it is said to have been the first of the Alpine passes, in modern times, at any rate, opened to wheeled traffic. Long before this date, however, it had been a frequented highway.

Some people in the Middle Ages went so far as to

assert that Cæsar, the ubiquitous, crossed the Alps by this route; "but," remarks Josias Simler, the judicious historian of the Valais, in the sixteenth century, "while I would not say that Cæsar never led an army this way, it certainly was not by this road that he came to attack the Helvetians, as recorded in his first book." Others again found traces in the name of a Roman Sempronius, whence the step to Scipio was easy. We may, however, rest content with the very respectable antiquity for which we have good evidence. Mr. Coolidge, in his "Swiss Travel and Swiss Guide-books," tells us that so far back as 1235 a hospice, or shelter-house, existed on the pass, and was looked after by the Hospitallers, or Knights of St. John. This building has long disappeared. The so-called "Old Hospice," which stands on the right-hand side of the road, a little beyond the summit to one going south, was built after 1650 by Gaspar Stockalper, of Brieg, to whom the ground was conceded by that parish; and the hospice now in use, and managed by St. Bernard monks, was founded by Napoleon. Standing as it does at no great distance from inhabited places, it does not, of course, receive anything like the troops of visitors who enliven the parent establishment; but a few dogs are kept, and in winter, when the snow is deep on the pass, the services of the brethren are occasionally in request. The road is, of course, admirable, and so long as the traveller keeps to it he can hardly lose his way in the worst of weather; but it is taken for the sake of the gradient far up into a side valley, between Brieg and Berisal, whence it regains the main valley, after a mighty sweep of ten or twelve miles, at a point not much more than a mile distant from where it had diverged. The pedestrian will, therefore, seek for a short cut; and such exist. Let him beware, however, of trying to save too much distance. A good many years ago the present writer was descending from the Simplon to Brieg with a friend

and an experienced Zermatt guide. The guide professed to know of a shorter than what may be called the legitimate short cut. This led along a water-course channelled in the mountain side, and as long as the slope was moderate did very well. But a time arrived when the grassy slopes fell away, and were replaced by a sheer precipice, across the face of which the little aqueduct was carried in hollow tree-stems, supported by iron stanchions driven into the rock. There was no help for it; along these the party had to pass, after the fashion of tight-rope walkers, steadying themselves with their ice-axes against the rock wall. The footing was good



THE OLD HOSPICE.

enough, and a person with a steady head was in no danger of slipping; but one could not help wondering how often the soundness of both pipes and supports was tested, and hoping that the last time had not been very long ago.

But to go back to the early records of the pass. The approach to it on the north side, by the long and

where arriving, we found little meat for our great stomachs, and cold comfort, for all the hot, stinking stove."

Poor Mr. Lassels! How many a British tourist since his day has been in the like case? But even from this short extract we may see how times and fashions have changed. The only things which concern him are the



VIEW FROM BERISAL.

level valley of the Rhone, is so easy, that the route seems always to have been popular with tourists. One of these, Mr. Richard Lassels, a learned preceptor, who seems to have been much in demand as a traveling tutor to young noblemen in the reign of Charles II., has left us a lively account. Journeying up the Valais—which then, it should be remembered, and indeed till 1815, formed no part of the Swiss Federation, but consisted of a number of little commonwealths, with the Bishop of Sion at their head—Mr. Lassels reached Brieg and slept there, like any modern tourist. "Next morning," he says, "we began to climb the hills for a breakfast. For the space of three hours our horses eased us, the ascent not being so risky as we expected from so rugged a brow of hills; but when we came to the steep of the hill itself, Mount Sampion (one of the great Staircases of Italy), we were forced to compliment our horses and go afoot. It was towards the very beginning of October when we passed that way, and therefore found that hill in a good humour, otherwise it is froward enough. Having in one hour's time crawled up the steep of the hill, we had two hours' more riding to the village and inn of Sampion,

or otherwise, of travel. For him the Simplon Pass is merely a "staircase of Italy;" an obstacle to be surmounted before the goal can be reached. Of mountain scenery as an object in itself he has no idea. On his right he had the mighty group of the Fletschhorn; on his left the beautiful snow-fields of Monte Leone; and if he cared to look back when he reached the top of the pass, he would have seen the view which is illustrated at the head of this paper.

To the modern tourist the mere view of the two great peaks, Nesthorn and Aletschhorn, with their host of attendant pinnacles, rising above the basin of the noblest glacier in Europe, is a sight "to rout the brood of cares." Yet it may be that fashion has more to do with the matter than we always allow. The seventeenth-century way of regarding mountains as tiresome and unlovely hindrances to travel, cannot be wholly extinct, or we should hardly be talking so much of a Simplon tunnel; and proposing, in order to shorten the journey into Italy by a few hours, to exchange once more the pure air and glorious scenery of a road among the mountain-tops for a fetid and filthy burrow through their roots.

A. J. BUTLER.

